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Clinton Pressured Reno On MLK Case

GOP accuses him of 'political pandering'

By Michael Dorman
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President Bill Clinton pressured a reluctant Attorney General Janet Reno into ordering a renewed investigation into the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., informed sources in Washington and Tennessee said Friday.

Former Republican National Committee Chairman Rich Bond immediately charged that, if the reports were true, Clinton had descended "to shameless political pandering."

Myron Marlin, a Reno spokesman, did not deny the accuracy of the reports. He said simply: "The attorney general wouldn't have allowed this to proceed unless she felt it was the appropriate and right thing to do." The White House and the King family did not respond to telephoned requests for comment.

Only under the president's pressure, the sources said, did Reno order a limited new investigation. She refused to order a sweeping investigation of the entire case by a special prosecutor, as requested by King's family. Instead, she directed federal prosecutors and agents to limit the investigation to two narrow leads in the case. Both of those leads have previously been described as dead ends by other federal and state authorities. The FBI officially called one of them a "fabrication."

Political sources said such a strategy — some law-enforcement officials called it a charade — would presumably permit Clinton to stay on the favorable side of the Kings and avoid alienating black voters. "I'd presume the attorney general had more information at her disposal than the president did," Bond said. "Therefore, if an investigation was unwarranted, I can only conclude the president proceeded with shameless political pandering."

King's widow, Coretta Scott King, met with Clinton June 16, 1998. White House spokesman Barry Toiv said then she "urged him to reopen a federal investigation into her husband's assassination." James Earl Ray, a longtime criminal, pleaded guilty to the 1968 Memphis murder and drew a 99-year prison term but later recanted — claiming he was a patsy. Members of the King family said they believed him and thus wanted a new investigation.

Toiv said Clinton told the civil-rights leader's widow and her four children, who accompanied her, that he would wait for Reno's recommendation "before he decides whether any further action by the federal government is appropriate." Members of the King family said they doubted Ray, who died in April, 1998, acted alone.

Law-enforcement officials beyond Tennessee and Washington said they were puzzled by Reno's decision because the two leads seemed to be going nowhere. Reno, a year ago this week, ordered the limited investigation covering two angles. One concerned a claim by a Memphis restaurant owner, Loyd Jowers, long discredited by several law-enforcement agencies, that he was offered $100,000 to hire a hit man to kill King. The other dealt with a claim by a former FBI agent that he searched Ray's car in Atlanta days after the murder and found evidence supporting a conspiracy theory. An FBI spokesman said the former agent, Donald Wilson, was never even near the car and the story was fabricated.

James Earl Ray's brother and closest associate, Jerry Ray, said in a telephone interview Friday from his home in Smartt, Tenn.: "Not only did Clinton apply pressure, Janet Reno is covering herself the same way she did in the Waco case. The FBI is investigating the FBI again. We know how that's going to come out."

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